

Events in Vietnam

The Vietnam War was the costliest and longest war fought in U.S. history. More bomb tonnage was dropped on North Vietnam than on Germany, Italy, and Japan during all of World War II. Over 50,000 American troops died in Vietnam. How did the U.S. become involved in the war and what was the outcome? These and other issues are addressed in the various sections below.

Beginnings During WW II, Japan invaded French Indochina. After the war, the communist Vietminh seized the capital city, Hanoi, and declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or North Vietnam. France supported Emperor Bao Dai and helped to establish a new state of Vietnam, or South Vietnam, with a capital at Saigon. The United States recognized the Saigon government. Meanwhile, the French and the Vietminh were at war. In 1954, at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French suffered defeat and withdrew their forces. Under accords drawn at a meeting in Geneva, France and North Vietnam agreed to a truce and future free elections for reunification. Neither side honored the accords, however, and civil war continued. In 1954 the U.S. offered direct economic aid to South Vietnam. The following year U.S. military advisers were sent to train Vietnamese soldiers.

Domino Theory When Kennedy came into office, his predecessor, President Eisenhower, warned him that if the U.S. allowed South Vietnam to fall to the Communists, the next in line would be Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and on into the Subcontinent. This Domino Theory worried Kennedy, and he pledged to help South Vietnam remain independent. U.S. economic and military aid increased. In 1961, 400 army personnel were sent to Saigon to operate two noncombat helicopter units. By 1962 more than 10,000 U.S. military men were in place.

Gulf of Tonkin After President Kennedy was assassinated, President Johnson vowed not to lose Vietnam to communism. On August 2, 1964, it was reported that the USNS Maddox, a U.S. destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, had been attacked by North Vietnam. This incident led Congress to pass a resolution allowing the president to use U.S. troops without a formal declaration of war or approval from Congress. The president ordered jets to begin retaliatory bombing of military targets in North Vietnam. In March of 1965, the first ground-force combat units of marines brought the level of U.S. troops to 27,000. By the end of the year there were almost 200,000 American combat forces in Vietnam.

Tet Offensive North Vietnam and its Viet Cong allies launched a huge surprise attack on major cities in the South on January 30, 1968. Because it began during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, the attack was called the Tet Offensive. The U.S. counterattack was successful, but both sides suffered massive casualties.

Peace Talks Following the Tet Offensive the U.S. halted bombing in Vietnam, and peace talks were initiated in Paris. No agreement could be reached at that time. Early in 1969 President Nixon announced his plan for Vietnamization of the war, and for a gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces. By September of 1969, 55,000 American soldiers had left Vietnam. Secret peace talks between Henry Kissinger of the U.S. and Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam began in Paris in 1970. The talks continued for three years, as did the fighting in Vietnam. Finally, in January of 1973, a cease fire agreement was reached. The U.S. and its allies withdrew from Vietnam in March of that year.

Suggested Activity

Research Have students find out more about the following people and places associated with the Vietnam war.

My Lai Massacre

Haiphong Harbor

POWS

Lt. Calley

Ho Chi Minh Trail

The fall of Saigon

General William Westmoreland

Laos

Allies of the U.S.

Danang

Cambodia

Allies of North Vietnam